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Donald Morris / an analysis

Important intelligence decisions loom



The weeks following an incumbent's loss are peculiar. Interest in the lame duck dwindles rapidly — he is no longer where the action is. Interest in the winner mounts rapidly, but gets nothing to feed on. The winner is now shifting from rhetoric to reality, and if he has any sense (which he must have, or he wouldn't have won), he keeps his mouth shut. Sooner or later he must start announcing his appointments; until he does, the press can do little but keep tabs on who comes to visit and speculate about the conversation.

One lively topic for speculation has been the future shape of the intelligence community. President-elect Carter's views in this area are not well known — it was at the precise point at which he started to answer a question on that subject that the famous sound failure occurred in the first debate and no one seems to have gotten around to asking him again.

When Frank Church had milked his intelligence hearings of every last dribble of publicity, he dropped the subject, leaving behind a few pious recommendations but no concrete legislation. The intelligence community, savagely mauled and for all practical purposes paralyzed, is still organized and controlled in precisely the same manner it was before Church decided to run for president.

Jimmy Carter has several options, starting with a replacement for George Bush as director of the Central Intelligence Agency (DCI). It is a pity, although understandable, that

Bush is resigning; despite the political overtones of his appointment he has performed admirably and non-politically in his short tenure.

But DCI is and must remain a nonpolitical post and were Bush to retain it, he would have to trade a political career for a nonpolitical one. And 1976 is a critical year for young, competent Republicans, because 1980 and 1984 are just around the corner and it is almost certain that the names which will then occupy the headlines as potential contenders will not be the same names we have been reading this year.

Oddly enough, a name often mentioned as a replacement for Bush is that of James Schlesinger, which would be a bizarre choice indeed.

Schlesinger, for all his reputation for competence and probity, is also the owner of a reputation for truly monumental abrasiveness. His previous — and mercifully brief — sojourn as DCI wreaked far more internal havoc on the CIA than ever Frank Church or Otis Pike managed.

The Congressional hearings did what they could to destroy the agency's reputation and make it impossible for the executive branch to utilize it, but they left almost no internal mark.

Schlesinger arbitrarily fired scores of officials, apparently gratuitously and for effect, not cause, and he had virtually shattered morale by the time he left. This reign of terror

was largely unpublicized and the agency was so shaken that only Colby's skillful hands kept it going during the hearings.

The major speculative area, however, is not in the choice of a DCI but in reorganization — will Carter surgically separate the Siamese triplets of information collection, intelligence production and covert action?

There are — especially to those outside the community — apparently cogent reasons why this should be done. Those inside, to whom the fancied disadvantages are far more theoretical than practical, advance equally cogent reasons to show why surgery will not work. (Separation has been tried before, and elsewhere, and has never worked, and despite their common roof, the triplets do not really trip over each other.)

The real changes to watch will be in the internal organization of the National Security Council — an area our collective media are notoriously poor at covering. But the control of almost all executive organs of the government starts here — not in the legislative branch — and it is a pity the coverage is not better.

But officials working in the NSC rarely are as cooperative as senators and representatives in providing headlines. In fact, they tend to be remarkably uncooperative, which makes news hard to come by.

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